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Lisa Rieck

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One College Avenue | Mechanicsburg PA 17055

Staying Between
By Lisa Rieck

I was trying to stay between the white lines, to keep off of the rumble strips on the sides of the Kansas highway that were sure to wake everyone up when they came in contact with the tires. They had to have rumble strips because the road was so straight that you almost didn't need your hands to drive, and the scenery was the same mile after mile after mile, so it was easy to daydream and drift over lines on the road's shoulder.

She was trying to keep me awake. We were responsible for the lives of the ten others in the van, sleeping on the floor and on the seats and in the space between the door and the arm rests. I had been strangely excited for this, for driving through Kansas at 1 a.m. en route to Colorado, for the straightness and the flatness and the need for rumble strips on the side of the road. I had heard that there were only fields in Kansas and, every once in awhile, a tree. And it was true for the most part. I could see forever in the black night sky because there was nothing to block my vision. I guess I always knew the sky was endless, stretching on and on around the earth, stretching on like the fields I was driving past, but it's hard to picture endlessness when there are so many things in the way: buildings and oak trees and water towers. So if I was drifting a little outside the lines, it was only because I was trying to soak in that wide open expanse of middle-of-the-night sky. Had I ever seen that much black at once before, ever realized what a beautiful color it is all by itself, a stunning black satin cape?

I had seen the sky purple and orange and pink before, at the Gulf of Mexico when I was on vacation with my best friend and her parents my junior year of high school. I took pictures so that when I forgot what it looked like, I would have something to help me remember (as if the pictures really captured it). I had seen the sky gray before, too, full of cloudy gloom looming over my small town and the house I've lived in since I was three. I had even seen the sky big

once on a junior high canoe trip in Wisconsin. Sitting next to the campfire one night after the kids were in their tents, I could see a piece of sky through the trees, and it looked so wide and deep and big, even though I could only see a small section. But I had never seen the sky endless until I drove through Kansas that night, looking out the van windows at the sky stretching on and on in every direction, blocked by nothing.

Once, when I was riding down a highway with my high school tennis coach, we drove by a sign sticking up into the air, advertising a restaurant and a gas station. "Who gave them permission to take up that much sky?" my coach had asked. Whoever put it up must have thought the sky was free. But they were wrong. It's priceless.

I was thinking about endlessness and pricelessness as I drove through Kansas. I was thinking about struggles that seem to be a constant part of me, struggles I guessed I would stop thinking I was ever past because they always came back when I watched extroverts swiftly take control or teach or make others laugh. I felt like Hosea, married to an endless cycle of struggle and then hope and then waking up lonely the next morning.

And pricelessness. What makes something priceless? Is it beauty or power or endlessness? I wanted to know because I was struggling to find worth working at a job that could be done by one person, as it had been before I started working. Or maybe it was the opposite. Maybe I was realizing the job could never be done by just two people, so who was my boss kidding and who was I kidding and who were we really impacting anyway?

Around 2 a.m. we switched drivers at a Kansas truck stop, getting off the highway at an exit that didn't say "No Services." I didn't mind; it had been getting harder and harder to stay between the lines, even with the caffeine and LeAnne next to me talking and the music going and the beautiful black cape covering us all around. Our big white church van must have looked like

one of the Apollos sailing through space, drifting to the sides every now and then while moving forward. I willingly gave up the driver's seat. Laying down on the van floor, I slept for awhile, finally blocking out the two talking in front of me, the two now responsible for staying between the lines and the cornfields.

When I woke, it was 4 a.m. From where I was I could see out of the side window of the van that the black that had blanketed us so fully, so gently, had been replaced by an incredible lightness, by flashes of lightning chasing after each other, each trying to outdo the other in beauty and burning and brightness. I had seen lightning before, great streaks separating the sky into pieces, as the surface of the earth splits and cracks during earthquakes. But I never saw lightning be so bold until I rode through Kansas that night, never saw lightning throw itself forward so freely, over and over again, opening itself up to criticism and judgment, but utterly unconscious of itself, too. I sat up and looked around in amazement at that endlessness again, this time flashes of light exploding as far as I could see, glorying in their freedom, in the fact that the sky was theirs to fill with fire and heat. It was priceless, and I got to watch it for free as we drove past farmland and past farmland and past farmland, and maybe for the first time in my life, I loved that I couldn't get out from under something, that even if we drove all the way to the coast of California – even if we flew across the ocean, around the world – we couldn't get out from under that big, full sky that covered highways and farmland and rumble strips and questions and frustrations and fears.

I had been thinking about emptiness because I knew what it felt like, like hunger that consumes your insides, like a child's room the day after the funeral. I knew what it felt like to be empty of anything to give. I knew about the heaviness of emptiness, the weight of a smile that is

trying to hide how much hurt lies behind it. I knew about the fullness emptiness brings – the eyes full of tears, the mind full of doubts and assumptions, consumed with self.

But I was learning, as we drove past those farms, through the Breadbasket of America, what it felt like to be filled. I don't think the sky knows about emptiness. It only knows about filling and about being full. It can't help being beautiful, really. It just is. When the sun leaves, it must be dark. And when the air is charged, lightning must come. There is no hesitation, no self-consciousness.

I lay in my space on the floor between the seats looking out through the side window of the van at the light night sky, resting in being wrapped in something that can only be itself. I started to feel drowsy again, the kind of drowsiness that comes after dinner, that comes from fullness and security, from knowing what's there when you fall asleep will still be there when you wake. Maybe pricelessness comes less from the object being loved and more from the one loving – loving the way the sky wraps itself around me, holding me between its blackness and its brightness, between quiet comfort and illumination, making me look up.

Out From Under
By Lisa Rieck

You said the sky was drunk with water. Maybe we were crazy, but we went to dinner anyway, the two of us and your big umbrella.

I found out you were thirty-two that night when you ordered beer and showed the waitress your ID. I never would have guessed your age. In all honesty, you were a hard one to figure out – thirty-two and single. You were the private kind; I wondered if that came from one-sided phone conversations or from relationships that didn't quite work out or from questions that you've been told have no answers. We were the only ones there, and we sat at a small table up against the wall, twisting cold drinks around in our hands, talking of eighties music and statistics and religion. Your umbrella rested on the floor beside your seat, rain rolling off of it slowly, creating a puddle that some tired, single-mother waitress would have to mop up later. As we talked, you didn't ask if I ever felt lonely. You didn't tell me that my eyes were the most amazing blue you've ever seen, and you didn't try to reach across the table and grab my hand and rub your thumb back and forth across my knuckle. You asked, narrowing your eyes and swirling your beer in your bottle, what I thought of love.

The thunder had started before, but the shrieking right then startled us. Wind was not supposed to shriek like a woman who just got the phone call that her husband is dead. You took one more drink while your question hung in the air between us, until it was ripped out of the room by that screaming, surging, swirling wind that broke through the glass window behind me. You flung your arms up over your eyes to keep the wind-shattered glass from making you completely blind. All the windows on the building broke and the door was – gone, allowing more water to surge in from outside and drown our feet. We were flung to the ground and then

up against the wall, which was the only thing that kept us in town. You tried to stand up, to fight that flood that literally knocked you off your feet with its power. And that wind that drove through us like a semi truck, through the pores of skin in front, through ribs and lungs and arteries, through vertebrae, and out through the restaurant wall against our backs. The wind beat against the building like a thousand fists.

As we strained to look outside through the air thick with rain and wind, we could see bikes and chairs and whole trees streaming, running, flailing like awkward birds. They blurred by and then probably crashed into something – the middle of the street lamp, the neon “Carol’s Diner” sign in the center of town – to have branches broken, and pedals broken, and chair legs broken, broken, broken. Inside, we struggled and slid and crawled to places safer than the wall. I ended up at a corner booth, grabbing the pole that attached the table to the floor. You were pinned up against the bar now, desperately hugging the stool bolted to the linoleum, probably unsure, like me, of how long you could hold on against the force of the wind and the water trying to rip the very insides out of you. I had seen other people try to hold on like that before – in movies and on TV, people holding on to lamp posts and stop signs and boat railings. I had seen people holding on by their fingertips, by their last breath, holding on to a telephone or an overdue bill, drowning from wind or from what they could never pay or from the words on the other end of the line that hurt so bad they couldn’t breathe. I wondered if you had ever held on like that, like you were now. Who knew that a stool, a bolt, would keep you here?

We were waiting for the building to flatten. You looked as if you were yelling something, but I could hear nothing above the painful, agonizing wail of the wind as it violently wrapped around us.

All of you was soaked – maybe you had never been that wet. Maybe your umbrella had done a good job of keeping rain out all these years. Maybe your sleeves had never stuck to your arms like that, and your hair had never held on to your head so tightly. Had you ever seen that much water untamed, running free like the oppressed of the world set loose from their lives of abuse and loneliness and boredom and brokenness. You were wet, and you couldn't stop the water, and you couldn't run from it, and it was soaking into your skin, seeping through your skin, and it was getting to your blood. It baptized you in its power, that water, flinging itself recklessly, lavishly onto your body.

Suddenly it was still – except for our chests heaving up and down and our hearts heaving up and down inside as we tried to breathe, and except for the floodwater still sloshing up around our shins. The rain was no longer hammering on the roof of the building which we were relieved was still separating us, however insignificantly, from the outside. You asked, breathing hard, if I was okay, and your voice seemed like it shouldn't have been loud enough for me to hear. Your clothes were violently dripping water everywhere, replacing the rain that had stopped falling into the room. I was fine (except I was shaking a little and bleeding slightly from the broken window and wondering how you were) but I didn't say anything. You didn't seem to mind that I didn't answer; you could see I was still alive, and still in the room, and that seemed to be more than either of us could ask for.

We stayed where we were; I could tell we were reluctant to move from our positions, you at the bar, and me at the corner booth attached to the wall. We didn't want to move even one step away from what we knew was safe. You tried to look through the hole where a window had been. Squinting and staring intently, you looked as if you thought you could see the wind if you focused hard enough. From your limited viewpoint I wondered if you could see the top of a car

sticking out of the water rushing down what I knew was the street. Where was the owner of the car? I thought about how, when the owner parked the car there, he never knew it would be washed by a river running down the street later. And when he woke he never knew how water would change his life, like we never knew when we woke, when we walked to dinner, you holding your umbrella above us as rain splashed on the sidewalk and the street signs and the tips of our shoes. We had been caught in the expectation of a normal day, caught in the rain and the shine of the lights off the wet pavement, caught in feelings of safety. I wanted to ask how you were feeling right then, and if your hands and fingers and arms were as tired as mine after being wrapped around your pole so tightly for so long. I wondered how strong you were; I didn't know because I had never seen you fight for a cause or a country or yourself.

The silence was as loud as the wind had been.

You tore your gaze away from the outside and looked down into the murky water, almost as if you thought it would tell you where it came from if you looked hard enough. You looked like you wanted to know what this water really was, the water embracing your body. I think it surprised you – its thoroughness, its completeness, its firmness. Because even though the rain had stopped, the water was still soaking, still sweeping through and seeping through the skin, still seeking and softening and dripping through.

Suddenly the wind blasted through the room again, so powerfully that I barely had time to grab onto my pole. Shrieking, the wind clamped down on us from every side, gripping like it would never let go. Were you praying that I would not let go of my pole and that you would not let go of your stool as we twisted and drowned in that wind?

The water was washing over us again too as the wind spurred it on stirring up the depths you had tried to see through. It poured through the room from one side to the other and out the

open doorway foaming and swirling recklessly. You said later – forgetting that I was even in the room – that even as you fought, even as you held on with everything in you, the water pushed through you, and you couldn't hold back from it any longer what was inside, the thoughts and fears and desires you'd been so careful to hide. And you couldn't even let go of your steel stool pole to try to get them back as the water rushed them away. You wanted it to leave, you said – this ripping, revealing, costly wind and water – but you ached for it, too: that cleansing – the wind taking what you would never give up, the water washing somehow what you could never get clean. And I wondered how the water could take what was never offered, just like that; its boldness and confidence unnerved me.

The rain screamed down rushing in through pane-less holes. How could the sky hold that much water? Where did it hide all the fury and power and potential when it was blue?

You told me afterward that you thought about how you had taken the sky for granted just a week earlier when you woke because the sun was there, and you had breathed in and out then, that freshness, that blue above you. But you didn't realize how good the blue smelled until you could barely breathe in the middle of that fiery water.

What were we in the midst of the wind and rain and flood? We were allowed to hold on to our tiny poles in the middle of that restaurant, in the middle of the storm, but I think we both knew we could have been torn away, torn – in one breath, in the time it took to click open an umbrella. After it was over we stood in that loud, piercing silence once again, in the center of the room we had entered just a few hours earlier. Those hours felt at least as long as Noah's forty days and nights of rain and rain and rain and rain that destroyed and cleansed. Had you ever been as naked and unsheltered as you were that night? Had anything ever touched you that completely, wrapping itself around every inch of your skin the way the water did?

If you cried during the storm I never knew. You (being the private kind) never told me that, and I couldn't tell with all of the wind and rain and flood dripping down your face. I didn't cry, but I thought about weeping when it was over and the two of us finally had the courage to move to the middle of the room where there was nothing but water then. "God," you said, shaking your head and looking thirty-two.

When we met again we sat underneath the sky, holding cold drinks, talking about bar stools and God. You told me about the tree in your yard that you had been meaning to cut down for awhile that was gone when you got home. And I told you about my broken bedroom window that I had to replace.

We sat and talked then about more than just the weather; you seemed more thirty-two, and less private. And even though it was supposed to rain, you hadn't brought an umbrella with you. As we talked, we gazed at the twilight sky. Had you ever seen the sky like that before, with clouds partially covering emerging stars and all of it (we now knew) hiding storms and water and wind somewhere? You asked me a second time what I thought of love. And the answer hung in that big sky between us, and around us, and above us, sitting with us in the evening air.

Storm
By Lisa Rieck

She was the private kind. She had an uncanny ability to conceal what she was thinking with a smile, with a brief sentence and a tone of voice that implied everything was fine, with a quietness that seemed to disappear inside itself so that no one noticed until later that she hadn't said very much. She was relieved by how many different phrases and meanings a smile and a nod could pass for. And it wasn't difficult for her to only express a fraction of what she was thinking and feeling; she was in control of her mouth and in control of her eyes, constantly keeping them from telling too much. And if she was surprised by something, she never let it show because she didn't want others to know how little she really knew. She found security in the fact that, even if she didn't know, she was good at hiding it, and that seemed like something to be proud of.

She hadn't always been so private. She used to yell at kids on the playground if they made her mad, and not care so much who saw her cry, and even talk to strangers sometimes. Maybe she became private as she started learning more, and realizing just how little she knew. Or maybe it was because, as she learned to love the power of words, some things became harder to express. Maybe she didn't trust others not to judge the way words came out. Or maybe it was just that her voice got quieter while the world around her got louder, so people didn't hear when she spoke, so she just stopped saying much altogether.

She was single, too. It was a safe way to live. Maybe lonely at times, but very safe, because she was in control and because she could confide as much or as little as she wanted to whomever she chose. She figured that marriage – that most intimate of all relationships – would happen *later*: that vague, distant, impersonal point in time that didn't have to be dealt with at the present moment. Being single, she could go anywhere and do anything with no thought of

pathetic post cards sent cross-country every other day or high phone bills from hours of soul-baring and ecstatic sighs at the sound of the other person's voice that AT&T is so thankful for. So she was single and safe (and privately relieved it was that way).

The storm started at lunch on a Saturday in September. She said she would go to lunch with him when he called because they were friends and she hadn't seen him since May and she thought it would be nice to hear how he was doing (and maybe fill him in a little on how she was doing). And of course, they hugged when they met on the sidewalk outside because they were friends and she hadn't seen him since May. And she didn't tell him, but it was really good to see him and talk with him over a lunch that he wouldn't let her pay for, because, after all, they were friends, and she hadn't seen him since May.

He kept coming back. She wasn't sure why, because she (being the private kind) didn't tell him how much she loved it when he showed up at her door, didn't share how many times a day she checked e-mail, didn't describe the smile that kept coming over her face the night he called. She wouldn't let on how much she was moved by the sheer force of possibility, by the force of his reassuring presence and his words that were hitting her head like drops of rain and soaking in, and blowing her away. He was trying to figure her out, and she was trying to figure herself out, trying to figure out if the sky was falling or if she was just walking with her head in the rain and her heart in the clouds and her feet a little above ground.

When they went for a walk one night they stopped to find constellations in the sky. She had learned them all in the sixth grade but they looked much different from her viewpoint next to him. She didn't tell him as they looked for Orion and Cassiopeia and the Big Dipper that she was looking at timing, too, and looking for a way out from under all that was covering and smothering and keeping her from seeing the Big Dipper, which they never did find that night.

She didn't share how scared she was that her eyes would start to glow like the stars if she looked up too long or stood there with him on that clear night too long; she was afraid that some of her thoughts and feelings might start to leak out without her permission. And she was scared for him to have control of her eyes. Already he was changing the way she saw the dark and the stars and the One Who created them.

When she went to his house for a weekend, she only said when she arrived that the directions were good; he never knew how nervous she was on the way. He didn't know that she was wondering how you ask someone to understand you when you don't even understand yourself, wondering if she could be trusted to understand someone else, wondering what she could say that she wouldn't regret the next day.

She wasn't a risk-taker; she hadn't been since she was four and she and her best friend decided to cut each other's hair in her mother's beauty salon in the basement of her house. But she had been not taking risks for years. She never water-skied, even though she wanted to, and others wanted her to, because she was afraid of breaking bones and cutting short her participation in high school sports. And she never raised her hand in youth group when they asked for volunteers because she was afraid they might make her eat Spam or scream or answer personal questions. She didn't usually order anything new off the menu when she went out to eat because she might not like it as much as what she always got. She never went bungee jumping or joined a college choir or said thank you to the woman who cleaned the bathrooms at the rest stop, even though she wanted to.

But she was losing the safety of singleness and starting to lose control of what words came out of her mouth when she was with him. She was afraid those fears and doubts and questions would all come rushing out and pour all over the pavement, flooding her and flooding

him standing there next to her, and knocking both of them off their feet with its force. Because the whole thing was so unexpected, and so powerful, and so overwhelming, the fact that they had gone to lunch and gone to dinner and taken walks and looked at the stars and were standing there then, waiting to talk about what they both had really been thinking about the whole time. She wanted to try to hold on tightly, to hold on to something to steady herself. But she had seen others hold on, watched friends hold on too tightly, to worn-out expectations and similar interests and the hope of a diamond by June.

And she was trying hard to hold in all she was thinking. Thoughts about taking and giving and hurting, about the fact that she was more aware of human frailty than ever and the fact that she would most likely hurt him at some point and he would most likely hurt her. She was afraid to know his imperfections and have him know hers. And she was afraid of rejection – not then, but later, afraid of offering pieces of herself like a child offers her crayon drawing to a parent, and having it rejected instead of treasured, thrown away instead of hung on the middle of the refrigerator. And she was afraid of possibilities, of transparency with someone she might not ever talk to or see again if things didn't work out.

She didn't tell him as they stood there that she was scared to bring up the topic of their relationship and the need for definition, but she figured that he already knew by the simple fact that she hadn't brought it up. She knew she needed commitment, though, since she was losing more and more of her uncanny ability to conceal what she was thinking every time she saw him. He started and said it first – what they were both thinking. That he would rather take the risk than not take it. And she was pretty sure her smile told him that she felt the same way, but she told him in words, too, just to make sure. "I want to take the risk," she said out loud. And she thought that was a good start to the relationship.

She was learning about letting out and letting go, learning to stop fighting and stop holding back and stop hiding herself inside her skin, learning about the vulnerability rain and wind bring when they wash away and carry away and strip away the outer layers of heart.

Eight days later she told him she was scared. She sent him a long e-mail that made him think he hadn't figured her out at all yet. He called that night and she told him again that she was scared, and tried to explain why (but, being the private kind, she didn't generally explain things to others very well). But she just wanted him to know how she was feeling (and she wanted to know that she would be able to get the words out when he asked her to explain). So they talked and he reassured and seemed to understand, and she started to learn to let go a little more. She had to, because he didn't accept a smile and a nod, didn't let her change the subject when he asked a question, didn't let her settle inside herself when they talked. But she didn't tell him that maybe the scariest part was that she *wanted* to tell him, in her cautious, rambling way that he was getting used to and starting to understand.

She was still wondering, though, how Ruth ever had the courage to lay her heart at Boaz's feet at a command from her mother-in-law. And she was wondering about Christ on the cross, wondering if He was afraid of the rejection He knew was coming as He hung fully naked with his heart hanging out, loving recklessly. She was afraid because she didn't know if she could love recklessly. But she was learning to get outside of herself and let thoughts flood through her eyes, knocking down barriers so that she could see others and so that she could see how the calm that was starting to come could be a part of her. And she was learning to trust, in a way that only vulnerability could bring, finding freedom in courage, in trusting, and in finding words to say.

The next time she saw him he surprised her, and he didn't have to try to figure out how glad she was to see him because it was coming from her eyes and coming from her smile and coming from her words, spilling out over the pavement they were standing on, flooding over them, telling all.

Blessing
By Lisa Rieck

We didn't think
to pray for rain that spring
and summer
because we were not the farmers
or the flower shop owners
or the camp counselors
who led young lives down the rivers
in June

So we didn't watch
the sky anxiously
wondering when the clouds
would form from drops of water
in the air

didn't notice the dust
our shoes stirred up
when we walked across
the ground's dry cracked skin

didn't grasp all the green
that was missing
in the brown surrounding
stale streets

We didn't know we needed
rain until it came,
until that first drip dropped onto
our busy hands and made us
pause to ponder water

until the drops dripped down our lips,
watering parched throats
and dehydrated songs

We never knew we loved
the sound of rain
against the window,
the soft drumming
drowning out
the clock's ticking
and hearts beating

We wondered how we ever
went so long
without water,
without children playing
in puddles,
without umbrellas
drying outside doors

Just an hour after
the first splash from sky
to sidewalk,
we collected rainwater
in empty cups
to save for sunny days
in case the next time
the water waited
until it was expected.

The Morning After
By Lisa Rieck

We prostitute
beneath the shooting stars –
those grains of dust giving light in the black,
illuminating us made from dust
with souls made for light –
us, loving dark
loving lust
loving lying in our beds
beneath the sky

If we would know
our nakedness, our shame
(and us to blame)
we'd be unnerved,
to see our every plea for worth
exposed by light,
and any goodness
ruined by our pride
(a spoiled bride whose lust-desire
deserves fire, drought, and doubt)

And in the night
our eyes which should be shut
to what the darkness holds
are open,
drinking in the sin of
tangled sheets and broken vows

But we won't wake
(though blind)
to find the sky has left us (dust),
like one is gone
the morning after the affair
(one pillow bare)

Instead, we wake in bed to find
the kind of sky we take for granted,
one waiting for our eyes to open
as fully naked,
we lie fully covered by sky,
so unworthy
(never seeing) of being
so loved

Advent
By Lisa Rieck

Storm
pushing with power
it knows it holds
to take, reveal,
destroy and heal,
tears through,
waging war on
what's left unsaid,
unforgiven.

Mass of
fluid and force
coursing through skin,
through sin,
throughout within,
assigns worth
through baptism
birth
and all that the dead
are dying for.

Then, spent
from living
and giving itself,
the storm steals off,
steals doubt
and, fighting for breath
dies
out

for the wage of love
is death.

All the House Holds

By Lisa Rieck

I

I slammed the front door hard, like I always did after work, hoping that maybe one day it would just fall right off the hinges into the house and knock down a wall. Apparently today wasn't the day. I sighed and left my coat on the floor where I had dropped it.

The house was stuffy. The kitchen still smelled like onions from last night's dinner. I wrinkled my nose and opened a window, sticking my face right up against the screen and breathing in deeply. That's how Patrick found me, standing on tiptoe leaning over the kitchen sink. Before I could speak, he burst into "You Are So Beautiful to Me" and walked over to me, running his fingers through my hair. I rolled my eyes and pushed his hand away. "The hamster's dead," I told him as I got vegetables out of the refrigerator for a salad.

The singing stopped and he said quietly, "I'm sorry. When did you find it?"

"This morning. After you left for work." My knife thudded loudly against the counter. Patrick slid a cutting board under the green pepper. "It only lasted ten months." After a pause I said, "So I guess that's it. I cleaned out the cage. It's in the storage room."

"The cage or the hamster?" he asked, walking over to me and touching my hair with his hand again.

"Ha, ha," I answered, ducking my head away from him.

"What did you do with the hamster?" he asked.

"I buried it. In the back." I stopped cutting just long enough to wave my knife in the direction of the backyard and then attacked a carrot, cutting even faster than before.

He looked out the window to see if he could tell where I had dug the hole. "I'm sure you didn't cry," he said.

I busied myself getting noodles and spaghetti sauce out of the pantry.

"We could get another one if you want."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be the same," I said. Scooping up the chopped vegetables, I flung them into the salad bowl. "I don't want to talk about the hamster anymore."

He picked up the jar of spaghetti sauce and drummed his fingers against the glass. "Let me finish dinner."

"No, it's okay. I'll make it. You relax." I took the sauce from him, even though he tried to hold onto it.

"Kylie." He turned to face me. "I don't mind finishing dinner. I want to."

"No." My voice was insistent and firm. "I've already started it," I said, filling a saucepan with water and setting it on the stove.

"You used to let me make dinner," he said. "Every night when I come home you have dinner started."

"Don't you want me to start dinner?" I asked.

"Yes—it's nice. But I'd like to give you a break." He reached past me to the jar of sauce. I tried to take it back and knocked it out of his hands. The jar fell to the floor and broke, sending sauce running down our slightly uneven kitchen floor.

I could see his back stiffen. Grabbing paper towel, he started wiping the floor furiously.

"I told you I would make it," I said angrily. "Why can't you just go downstairs and play one of your guitars and let me make dinner?" I picked up part of the jar and dropped it in the sink. "I hate this floor," I muttered as I wiped up the rest of the sauce which, by now, had trickled halfway across the kitchen.

"It's not the floor's fault," he said. "Look, let's just go out to eat."

I threw the dirty paper towel into the garbage can so hard that it almost bounced back out. "Why won't you just let me make dinner?"

The water on the stove was making spitting noises as it started to boil. "Fine," he said. "Fix the damn dinner. I'm going for a drive." He slammed the door on his way out. I was glad. Maybe it would help my cause.

When he got back, I was in bed. But I had left a plate of spaghetti sitting on the table for him. I knew when I came downstairs the next morning, though, that he hadn't touched it. Just like he was careful not to touch me when he slipped into bed.

II

It was a Monday when the older man came into the flower shop where I work. He shuffled when he walked, as if he couldn't see any good reason to pick his feet all the way up off the ground when he could get around just fine without as much effort. And he smelled stale, like leftovers.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I need some roses," he replied, looking around the store, overwhelmed.

"How many do you want, and what color?" I asked, leading him to the cooler where the roses were kept.

"Pink," he said firmly. "Pink roses." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "They're for my baby." I looked at him doubtfully, wondering how old his baby was. "How many do you want?"

"Two," he said, "because it's still me and her."

I picked out two roses and held them up for him to see. He squinted and then nodded, running his hand through his thin gray hair. Adding baby's breath, I carried the flowers over to the cash register to wrap them in paper. "You can fill out a card to go with them if you want to," I told him. When he looked up, I was surprised to see tears in his eyes. Breaking Cathy's rule that we were not to ask questions or pry into customers' personal lives, I asked him what was wrong.

"When we woke up this morning, my wife—she couldn't move her legs." He took the roses and shuffled out the door, unaware that I followed him to the front of the store and watched him climb into his little white Honda and drive away.

Patrick called and asked if I wanted to meet for lunch, so we met at the deli, the only place to eat that our little downtown offered.

"How's work?" he asked when we were seated with our food.

I shrugged. "Fine. I've been waiting on customers. An old man and a few women. Anniversaries. Birthday bouquets. The usual."

He nodded and then sat up straight, cocking his head to one side. "The Sound of Silence," he said triumphantly. I just shook my head. In a minute I could hear the song playing softly, too.

"How's the guitar world today?"

He gave me an enthusiastic account of his morning, jumping randomly from a customer description to a guitar they sold and back to the description of a different customer. I smiled when I finished my sandwich and he had only eaten half of his.

He walked me back and started to lean in to kiss me good-bye but then stopped awkwardly. I raised my eyes to his, so he quickly bent forward and gave me a quick kiss on the lips before turning to walk down the sidewalk.

I had said yes, that I'd see him for dinner, but I didn't go home right after work. I always used to call if I was going to be late, but this time I just left and started walking down the sidewalk, the opposite direction of our brick house with the dead crocuses out front and the uneven kitchen floor and the spare room upstairs that still had the Noah's ark border on the walls underneath the white paint we had covered it with.

I walked past houses that I had only driven by before, and even went down some streets that I had never been on. They were nice houses; sometimes I paused if I really loved the porch or the way the sidewalk in front curved to the side. I passed two houses that were for sale. At both houses I stopped and stood in the middle of the sidewalk for a while, just looking silently. There were brochures by one "For Sale" sign, so I took one and glanced through it. The price made me laugh. I put the brochure back and kept walking until I was hungry and the sky was dark.

III

I sat in the living room, drumming my hands against the couch. My left foot was tapping the floor rapidly. I didn't even know what time it was; it had to be at least nine.

Then I finally heard the doorknob turning. I could hear Frank Sinatra coming from the neighbor's house when Kylie opened the door.

We both stood facing each other silently for a minute. I didn't want to be the first one to say something. Finally she said, "Why were you sitting in the dark?"

"Where have you been?" I asked. She would do that sometimes—ask me a question that we both knew was totally irrelevant to the situation.

She set her purse down. "Out."

"What does that mean?"

"It means just what I said."

I folded my arms across my chest. "You couldn't call?"

She looked at me silently and slowly took off her coat to hang it on the coat rack.

One time when I was in college I sat in a restaurant for an hour waiting for a friend who never came. Later that day I found out he had been killed in a car accident on his way to meet me. So Kylie knew I hated when she made me wonder.

"What the hell does 'out' mean?" I asked without raising my voice. "Does it mean you had to work late? Does it mean you went shopping? Does it mean you were at—some other person's house?"

"Patrick—" Her eyes looked past me into the kitchen, into the living room, all around the entryway. She touched my arm with her hand, but I moved it away. "What would you think about selling the house and moving to a different one?" she blurted out all of a sudden.

I stared at her. "What?" I finally said.

"Moving. What do you think of the idea?"

"Kylie, we just bought this house. You're the practical one. Remember, we got this one because it was bigger, and we wanted room for kids when we have them—"

"Well we won't be needing any of those rooms anytime soon," I heard her mutter.

"And you liked that it was close to the shop and that I could keep all of my guitars downstairs. And remember how many houses we looked at that we hated? This was the only one—"

"Okay!" she said, raising her hand to get me to stop, like she was running a meeting instead of having a conversation. "I'm sorry I brought it up." She turned and started walking up the stairs. "I'm going to bed," she informed me.

I headed downstairs without a word and played my acoustic guitar for two hours. It was late when I went up to the bedroom. I could tell by the rhythm of Kylie's breathing that she was asleep. I sat in the armchair against the wall, just watching her chest rise and fall under our blue bedspread. I don't know what time it was when I fell asleep in the chair.

IV

I recognized his shuffle immediately, even before I looked up from the flowers I was wrapping for a customer. One of my coworkers, Tracy, started toward the old man, but I touched her arm and said, "I'll help him if you could just ring up this woman's items." Tracy looked at me questioningly but agreed.

The man walked right to the cooler where the roses were and stood still, intently staring through the glass.

"Roses again?" I asked.

He looked up in surprise and then gave me a small smile despite his tired, red-rimmed eyes. "Yes," he said. "Pink."

I carefully examined the roses and pulled out the two I thought were best. "How are these?" I asked, holding them up for his inspection.

He took them from me and twirled them between his fingers, making sure he saw every side, as if his wife's health depended on the quality of her roses. Finally he nodded.

When I added the baby's breath he asked, "What's the name of that stuff?"

"Baby's breath," I told him, biting my lip and looking away.

He nodded again, and I thought I saw another tiny smile. If it really was a smile, though, it didn't last long.

"How is your wife doing?" I inquired, walking to the cash register.

He shook his head. "It's her arms now. She can't move her arms." His eyes filled with tears. "But her heart's still beating. Every day when we wake up and her heart's still beating, I thank God."

I handed him the wrapped flowers. "Well, I hope she enjoys her flowers."

He nodded. She will. Pink is her favorite." He left the shop mumbling softly to himself.

Tracy came up beside me. "Do you know him?" she asked.

I was silent for a minute, staring thoughtfully after the man. "Yes," I finally said. "He's been in here before." I turned and looked at Tracy. "His wife is dying," I said and then turned abruptly and walked to the workroom. She came in a few minutes later while I was jabbing flowers into vases and snipping off ribbons, trying not to care if that man ever came back, or if his wife could still move her head or blink her eyes next week, or if he came back for two more roses or huge bouquets of them for her funeral.

"How's the house coming?" she asked, leaning against the counter.

I pulled my thoughts away from the man for a minute. "The house?"

"Are you finished with the painting?"

"Yeah. We finished that a few weeks ago."

"It's such a cute house," she said.

"The kitchen floor's uneven. And the front door is going to come off its hinges any day."

Before I left work, after the others had left, I wrapped two pink roses with baby's breath. When I got home I set them on a small table in our bedroom.

Patrick didn't notice them right away. It wasn't until after he asked me about my day that he saw them. "Who are those from?" he asked.

"No one," I said.

He stared at me, raising his eyebrows.

"I brought them from work," I explained.

His looked puzzled. "I thought you didn't like to have flowers around the house."

I shrugged. "I like to have these flowers in the house."

Patrick walked over to the roses and fingered them gently, bending down to smell them. "Why pink?" he asked.

I shrugged again. "I don't know. I just liked the pink ones."

"Okay." It was his turn to shrug. He placed his workbag next to the chair. "Steve brought his guitar in today. It's a Taylor. I played it for a half hour and loved it."

I groaned. "Does this mean we'll be adding another guitar to the collection downstairs?"

Patrick grabbed my hand and pulled me up off the bed. "That's what you get for marrying a musician."

"I thought I married a businessman," I said, escaping from his arms and heading downstairs.

"Wait," he said.

I paused on the stairs and turned to look up at him.

"It's Friday night," he said.

"Yeah," I said slowly, wondering what his point was.

"So let's watch a movie or play Scrabble or something. We haven't done that in so long."

"Oh. I was going to go use the treadmill," I said.

"Now?"

"Yeah." I paused. "Is that okay?"

"Sure, it's fine." The silence felt awkward, like we were on a first date instead of married. He turned and went back into the bedroom and I went downstairs.

I didn't go home again right after work. When I walked in the door around nine, Patrick was playing the guitar. He didn't bother to greet me. And I didn't bother to call down the stairs to him. Instead, I changed into my pajamas and laid down on the bed with *Better Homes and Gardens*. By the time Patrick came upstairs, I was under the covers, pretending to be asleep. I kept my eyes closed when he entered the room, when he changed, when he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, when he slid into bed next to me. I only opened them after the light was off. His back was to me. I wanted to reach over and touch his arm with my hand, or massage his tense shoulders, or run my fingers through his hair. Instead, I rolled over so my back was to his and lay perfectly straight and still. He fell asleep quickly.

VI

Kylie almost laughed when I got home from work today and picked her up, swinging her around like I used to when we were first married and could hardly stand to be apart while we were both at work.

I noticed because she had not laughed in months. She had an amazing laugh, too. That was why I had called her up and asked her to go out with me when I was in grad school. That was partly why I married her.

I gave her a long kiss, right there in the middle of the entryway. And she let me.

VII

Today I could not get out of bed. I tried so hard—I try so hard every morning—but this morning I couldn't do it. I couldn't get out of bed, couldn't walk down the hall past the spare room, couldn't get into the shower. I don't know why today is worse. Patrick was so sweet yesterday. I felt better than I have in a long time. But this morning when he tried to wake me up—three times—and when the alarm went off five times, I just couldn't get up. I mumbled for him to call the shop for me, and I guess he did, because no one called and left a message asking where I was. The phone rang, four times. I only had to roll over and reach across Patrick's side of the bed to the phone, but I couldn't do it. The dentist's office left a message reminding me of an appointment next week. Patrick left a message once telling me to call him when I got up. I didn't call.

He came home around noon. I heard him unlock the front door, walk in, and pause. Pulling the covers almost all the way over my head, I curled into the fetal position and pretended to be asleep. He entered the bedroom, walked over next to me, and laid his hand lightly on my back, I think just to see if I was really buried beneath all those blankets. Then he left the room and the house. I heard him drive away, knowing he'd probably try to call again and that for sure he'd be home early.

I slept on and off but mostly just laid in bed. I didn't even really think about much, which was a relief. I did wonder, though, if I could die as easily, curled there in my bed, covered in blankets, safe in the dark quiet calm. I felt like if I could just stay in bed every day like that, I could make it.

Why doesn't Patrick understand? But then, I remembered that other people lose loved ones every day. I wondered who I was to stay in bed. But I tried—so hard—this morning, to get up.

VIII

When the man came back to the flower shop, his shuffle was slower than usual. I beat him to the cooler.

"Back for more roses?" I asked him, trying to sound cheerful.

He stared blankly through the glass, making no signs that he had even heard me.

"Sir?" I asked hesitantly and then ran my fingers through my hair in the awkward pause. Clearing my throat, I said softly, "How's your wife doing?"

He finally looked over at me and said, "There are only nine roses in there. Can you order more?"

"More?" I asked, surprised that he had been counting. "We can order as many as you need – want –"

He looked through the glass and was silent again. When he spoke he was crying. "I want two dozen," he choked out.

I almost reached over to hug him, almost told him to bury his head in my shoulder and cry as long as he wanted to. Instead, I turned to look into the cooler, folding my arms tightly across my chest. "I'm so sorry," I told him, hating that that was all I could say. Me, of all people – that was all I could say. "When did she die?"

"Yesterday. I tried to stay up with her. I thought she fell asleep. And then I fell asleep. And then when I woke up—" He was weeping right there in the middle of the store, the glass reflecting his stooped, shaking frame.

Still facing the cooler, I took a small side step toward him, fighting the urge to walk away and get Tracy to come wait on him. "We can get you two dozen pink roses," I told him.

He nodded and pulled a large white handkerchief out of his pocket. I could hear him wheezing slightly and started to be afraid he would collapse and hit his head on the wooden shelves behind him. We both stared into the cooler again. "When—" I couldn't quite get it out. I tried again. "When is the funeral?"

"Wednesday."

I sniffed and finally turned to face him. Taking his elbow, I led him slowly to the cash register. He leaned against the counter gratefully.

Pulling out an order form, I took down the funeral information. When I got to his name I paused, surprised that I didn't know it. "What's your name and address?" I asked.

"Charles Moshan," he said, blowing his nose loudly. When he didn't continue, I looked up. "And your address?" I asked again.

"It's going to change," he replied, and his eyes filled with tears again.

My heart started pounding faster as I tried to think what I could say to keep him from weeping again. I knew I'd have to leave if he did. "You're moving?" I asked, a little too loudly.

He nodded. "I'm selling the house as soon as I can," he said slowly. "It's too big—"

"Well," I interrupted, "I'll just take down the phone number and address of your house. That's where you'll be for the next couple of days at least, right?"

"It's 601 Branch Street," he said automatically, almost mechanically.

I wrote it down. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" I asked, holding my breath because I wanted him to say yes so badly.

He didn't answer, just turned and shuffled away. I thought he was leaving, but he stopped at the cooler one more time and stood looking through the glass. I had only taken one or two steps toward him when he turned to me and said, "There are only nine roses in there. I need two dozen." He paused and then gave one slow nod with his head. "I need two dozen."

I couldn't answer for a minute but then said, "I have it down. Two dozen pink roses."

He shuffled away, blowing his nose as he went. As soon as the bell above the door jingled out that he was gone, Cathy stuck her head out of the workroom. "Another funeral?" she asked. "What day is this one?"

"Wednesday," I answered. "I'm ordering the flowers now. I'll do this arrangement."

She shrugged. "Okay. I think we have two other funerals on Wednesday, too. Tracy can do some of those arrangements.

I just nodded. She stared at me but then went back into the workroom when I picked up the phone. I was glad for something to do, glad that after I ordered the pink roses I had a list of arrangements that needed to be created.

And I was glad to have some place specific to walk to after work. "Please don't let it be brick," I said as I walked to Branch Street.

It had been two weeks since I came home to an empty house. This time, though, her car was gone, too. Without even getting out of my truck, I backed out of the driveway, nearly hitting another car driving by on the street. For almost two hours I drove around, looking for Kylie. I drove by every place I could think of where we used to go—friends' houses, restaurants, the mall, even three different grocery stores.

She was sitting in the living room when I returned. I slammed the door and tried to throw my coat and workbag on the coat rack, missing with both of them. Leaving them on the floor, I started to go upstairs.

"Patrick."

It wasn't like me to not look at her.

"Patrick," she said, a little more insistently.

I paused but still didn't turn around.

"Do you have a few minutes? Your wife would like to talk to you."

My voice was shaking. "I'm tired." I took one more step up the stairs.

"I've been looking at houses."

I turned around and stared at her for what seemed like ten minutes. "You're moving out?" I finally asked, sitting down on the stairs and running my hand through my hair.

"Yes." She looked at me. "But I want you to come, too. I want us both to move out of this house."

I shook my head slowly, looking all around.

"Say something," Kylie said.

"What's there to say? I thought we were done with this conversation. We've only had this house for a little over a year. It's the perfect location, the perfect size, remember? We got it because we wanted to start a fami—"

"I know. I know, I know, I know. And that's why I need to leave. I hate this house."

"Do you think running away will help?" I asked.

"I knew you would call it running away. I knew—"

"Isn't that what it is? Out of sight, out of mind?" I was having a hard time keeping my voice steady. "What would you call it?"

"I call it being able to maybe enjoy going home. Can I enjoy at least one thing? I call it not sweeping everything under the puke green living room rug and pretending that we're back to normal with nothing changed. Is that okay, Patrick?"

"You have to keep living. You can't crawl in a hole and die."

"Actually, Patrick, I *could* do that. I've thought of doing it lots of times."

We both became silent. I shook my head again and drummed my hands against the step I was sitting on. "I just don't *get* you, Kylie. I used to."

She didn't argue.

"So what am I supposed to do?" I asked her. I was too tired to try to guess.

"Come look at the house with me tomorrow."

"Have you already seen it?"

"Yes. I went tonight. It's on Branch Street."

"How did you find it?" I asked her.

"I know the guy who owns it. I actually stayed and talked with him for awhile—"

"Oh, that's just great," I said. I was almost never sarcastic, but I couldn't hold it in. "You were just hanging out with some other guy while your husband drove all over town looking for you."

"He's eighty," she continued, then paused. "You drove all over looking for me?"

I didn't answer, just fixed my eyes on her. What was wrong with us? We used to just fight about whose turn it was to change the sheets or what movie to rent.

"His wife just died," Kylie finally continued. "Lou Gehrig's disease. He just wants to sell the house and be out as fast as he can."

"Did she die in the house?" I shivered. "Why would you want to move there?"

"I didn't know her," Kylie said. She looked like she was going to go on but didn't.

"How do you know him?" I asked.

"He came into the flower shop a couple of times to buy her flowers, and I waited on him." Kylie looked at him. "She was all he had. They couldn't have kids."

I just nodded. "Are you sure you don't just want to buy the house to help him out, because you feel badly for him?"

Kylie shook her head. "I do feel badly for him. But I want to know why he still gets out of bed in the morning and how he does it."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "Couldn't you just ask him that, instead of moving into his house?"

She stood up and started pacing. I took that as a bad sign. "Do you know how much I hate standing in our kitchen, how much I hate taking a shower in our bathroom, how much I hate walking down the hallway upstairs? I've just been walking around after work because I didn't want to come in the house."

And apparently seeing *me* when she got home didn't make the prospect of coming in the house any better. "It's been six months," I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Six months and three days."

I took my hand out of my pocket and started drumming it against the step again. "Well then maybe if you just give it a little *more* time. Maybe in a few more months the house won't bother you so much. Things will get back to normal, we'll try again, Kylie, and maybe you'll feel—"

She suddenly walked up the stairs, brushing past me. I heard her go into the bathroom and lock the door.

"What am I supposed to say?" I yelled down the hall. I heard the shower start. "What do you want me to do? I'm sorry I don't know how to fix it," I said, hoping she caught the sarcasm through the sound of the running water.

When I got out of the shower, he was gone. I was upset that I hadn't left and let him stay in the damn house. He was still gone when I woke up at 2 a.m. And at 3:30. And at 4:12.

I didn't want to, but I called his store from work. I had told Mr. Moshan we'd come by to look at the house.

"Steve, can I talk to Patrick?" I said into the phone.

"Kylie?" he sounded surprised. "He called and said he wouldn't be in today."

My eyes scanned the shop quickly. "Oh that's right," I said with forced cheerfulness. "I completely forgot he wasn't working today. Thanks a lot, Steve."

I hung up and leaned against the wall. Cathy saw me and asked if anything was wrong.

"Nothing," I said quickly.

I couldn't think of anything to do to keep busy when I got home from work, so I took a shower. It didn't look like Patrick had been back to the house. The hot water felt good on my tense muscles.

I had been in the shower when Patrick got home from work early the night the baby was conceived. It was a Wednesday, and we had known that night, before I ever took a pregnancy test, before my period didn't come, before I went to the doctor, that the baby was born inside me. I jumped when Patrick opened the bathroom door but then squealed when I saw it was him.

"You're home early!" I said above the noise of the running water.

"Surprise," he said, leaning against the doorway, grinning adorably.

"Come here," I said, opening the shower door and sticking my head out.

He walked over and kissed me, gently. Catching him by surprise, I grabbed his arm and pulled him into the shower. His brown eyes got bigger and bigger as the water soaked his clothes, turning his light blue shirt to navy. Laughing, I didn't let him say anything, just pushed him up against the shower wall. He didn't protest. Instead, he kissed me again, longer this time, while the water washed over us. I helped him shed the clothes sticking to his tall, thin frame, flinging some of them out of the shower onto the bathroom floor, letting the rest simply drop right where we were standing as they came off.

He picked me up and stepped out of the shower, carrying me securely through the bathroom and across the bedroom, leaving the water running all night. We dripped all over the carpet, and all over the blue bedspread and white sheets, the water running down us dripping from his body onto mine, and from mine onto his. We knew that night when his skin touched my skin that a new one was created in me, part of me and part of him.

We woke the next morning to his wet clothes on the bathroom floor and the water still running in the shower and life pushing inside me. For five months we woke to life pushing inside me, forgetting what it was to wake without it.

I heard "When a Man Loves a Woman" today as I was driving around in my truck. It used to be our favorite song, because it was playing on the radio in our bedroom the night the baby was conceived. We had known that night, before Kylie ever took a pregnancy test, before her period didn't come, before she went to the doctor, that the baby was born inside her. She was in the shower when I got home from work early. I still smiled when I thought about how she jumped when I opened the bathroom door. And then she squealed—really, truly squealed—when she saw me.

"Surprise," I said, leaning against the doorframe. I could have stood in that doorway smiling forever.

"Come here," she said, opening the shower door and sticking her head out.

My smile widened. Walking over to her I kissed her gently. Before I knew what she was doing, she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the shower. Stunned, I stood motionless while she looked at me, laughing, as the water ran down over us. My light blue shirt turned to navy as the water soaked into it. She pushed me up against the wall, still laughing. I had no choice but to kiss her again—much longer this time—and run my fingers through her wet, tangled hair that smelled like flowers and apples and raspberries. Her fingers brushed my chest as she unbuttoned my shirt and helped me peel off the clothes that were sticking to my skin. I picked her up, loving again how little and light she is, and stepped out of the shower, leaving the water running all night. We dripped all over the carpet and the bedspread and each other, the water running from my body onto hers and from hers onto mine and the radio playing softly in the background. We knew that night when my skin touched her skin that a new one was created in her, part of me and part of her.

We woke the next morning to my wet clothes all over the bathroom and the water still running rhythmically in the shower and life pushing inside Kylie's skin. For five months we woke to life pushing inside her, forgetting what it was to wake without it.

I hated that today I woke in a Best Western, hated that I had spent the day driving around in my truck randomly, hated that I was turning onto Branch Street now to see this eighty-year-old's house that my wife wanted to buy. But most of all, I hated that I had slammed the door and walked out on the house where the baby was conceived.

XII

After my shower, I drove around until I ended up on Branch Street, in front of the house I wanted to own—and across the street from Patrick's truck. His truck was off, and he was just sitting inside of it. I knew he had seen me.

After a few minutes, I got out of my car and walked over to his truck, sliding into the passenger seat. We sat in silence for a while.

"So this is the house," Patrick finally said.

I slowly turned my head to look at him. I couldn't tell from his tone of voice what he was thinking or feeling. "Yeah," I said.

We were silent again.

"Where—"

"It's—"

We both started and then stopped. "You go," I said.

"I was just going to say that it's small."

"Have you been inside?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "It smells like— I'm not sure what."

"Leftovers?"

"Yes." We both smiled in spite of ourselves.

"What were you going to say?" Patrick asked me.

"I was going to ask where you stayed last night."

He held up a black and gold hotel-room key. "The Best Western."

I nodded. We had stayed at a Best Western on our honeymoon. Not even in a suite—we couldn't afford it—just a regular room on the second floor.

We were silent again. Finally Patrick said, "I didn't mean we had to have a family now. I want to have one—"

I put my hand on the door latch, but he locked the doors. I looked up in surprise.

"You're not leaving," he said quietly.

I moved my hand to the lock.

"If you leave, I will not move out of our house, whether you do or not," Patrick said.

I grabbed my hand with the other one and placed them both in my lap. But I added, "I won't stay in our house."

"I don't think I can move into this one."

Neither of us said anything for a long time. Finally I broke the silence. "So what are we going to do?"

He started the truck. "Tonight I'm going home."

When I got there later, he was asleep in a chair that he must have dragged into the spare room. Asleep like he was many times when we were painting the room yellow for the baby and couldn't seem to be in it enough. Asleep like he was when we painted it white again and moved the furniture out. As far as I knew, he hadn't fallen asleep in there for months. I hadn't even been in the room for months. I closed my eyes or looked the other way when I passed it on the way to the bathroom. We kept the door shut. We never let guests sleep in there. The morning after the baby was conceived we had entered the room together, his arms wrapped tightly around my stomach and back. We were both late to work that morning, but we had the color scheme and theme picked out by 10.

I left him sleeping like a baby in the spare room, closing the door softly behind me. Downstairs, I fished through his jacket pocket for The Best Western key and drove to the hotel. It didn't take me long to find his room. I threw my coat on the bed and got into the shower, and let the water run over me.

In the Rearview
By Lisa Rieck

She stuck out her thumb the way the Queen of England would, as if she alone knew how to do it the right way. The dog with her looked like a purebred, too, as far as I could tell.

I drove past her, not at all planning to stop, but her red hair stuck out against the green Ohio fields like an ornament on a Christmas tree. Since I liked red hair, I steered my rusting, light blue Honda onto the shoulder. Sticking my head out of the window, I looked back at her. She was young, even though she was jutting her chin out and sticking her chest out to try to look older. Her right hand gripped a guitar case, and a small pea green duffel bag was slung across her shoulder. She carried a black backpack on her back. "You want a ride?" I asked.

Her face was expressionless as she stared silently at me and my car and then down the road.

"I asked if you wanted a ride," I said. "Are you going to answer me?"

She narrowed her eyes, remaining silent.

"You don't seem to have a lot of options. Now you can get in this car or I'll just drive off and leave you for the next man who comes along."

Still staring at me she finally said, "Yeah, I'll take a ride." Stalking over to the back door on the passenger side of my car, she dumped her things on the back seat. "I'll sit in the back," she said, sliding in after the dog.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Where are you going? Just drop me off and I'll find a ride from there."

"Oh no," I groaned. "You're one of those ones who has no idea where she's going."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped. "How many girls do you pick up?"

I ignored her questions, noticing through my rearview mirror how her thick red hair was sticking out from her head like cactus spikes. "You got a name?" I asked.

"Sarah," she immediately said. I knew she was lying, and she knew I knew.

"I'll call you Kelly," I said. "Can I call you Kelly?"

"You can call me whatever you want. I don't care."

"I'm Bill."

She nodded and leaned her head back on the seat, closing her eyes. "So are you just starting out on your little adventure?" I asked her. "Or did you ride with other people before me?"

Her eyes were still closed, but I knew she wasn't asleep. Finally, she said, "I've been traveling for a little while."

"What's your dog's name?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Sam."

I knew she was telling the truth this time because Sam lifted his head up and looked at her when she said his name. She patted his head.

I watched in the rearview mirror as she closed her eyes again. Smiling, I asked, "So what made you get in my car?"

She sighed. "I don't think you can really trust anyone. So what does it matter who I ride with?"

"Why can't you trust them?" I asked.

She laughed bitterly. Closing her eyes, she laid her head down again against the back of the seat.

"You don't seem very grateful."

She kept her eyes closed as she spoke. "You could still kill me."

I looked straight at her in the rearview mirror. "Are you worried?"

She didn't open her eyes and, for a few minutes, I decided to let her pretend to sleep. The road we were on was like most Ohio roads: flat, straight, fast. You could go 75 easily and still get passed. The highway was solid and predictable; I liked that. And I liked all of the open space. You felt away and strangely settled, even if you were just passing through.

I glanced back at her still pretending to sleep. It occurred to me that she could accuse me of trying to kidnap or rape her. Maybe someone set her up and she was some psycho kid out to sue people with no witnesses of what did or didn't happen except a dog named Sam who was asleep on the seat.

"Hey," I said to her. "Kelly."

She opened her eyes but didn't move otherwise.

"What kind of dog is Sam?"

"A golden retriever. Purebred."

"You got money?" I asked. "A purebred could bring you a lot of money if you sold him."

She gave me a dirty look. I laughed. "So you play the guitar?" I asked.

"No, I just thought I'd bring it along for something extra to carry."

"Maybe you can play on the shoulder of the freeway for extra money." I laughed again. "My niece played the guitar."

"Played? She doesn't anymore?"

"No. I mean yes. She does still play. Are you hungry?" I asked.

She sat up, I guess giving up on trying to sleep, or on trying to make me think she was sleeping. Shaking her head, she started stroking Sam's fur, rolling his ears between her fingers. The sound of her stomach growling drowned out the rumbling of my car for a second.

"You don't tell the truth about much, do you? We'll stop because *I'm* hungry. That could be awhile, though. This is Ohio."

She didn't answer; just stared out her window and kept playing with Sam's ears.

We drove in silence then, except for Sam's tail thumping against the seat. It was getting dark, and I was low on gas. I wasn't really sure where we were. Maybe an hour from Cleveland. Maybe two. We came to an exit with a little gas pump on the sign but nothing else. No friendly knife and fork indicating food in the area. And the sign looked like it was at least sixty years old. I exited and turned right toward the one lone gas station nearby.

"Maybe you should take Sam out while we're stopped," I said.

Finally she met my eyes in the mirror. "Maybe you'll drive away with my stuff and leave me here while I do," she said.

"Take your stuff out then." I shrugged. "Maybe I'll kill Sam if he pees in my car."

She climbed out and pulled all her stuff out behind her, slamming the car door with her hip. With her bags on her shoulders, she looked like she was ready to camp next to the gas station, not take her dog for a dump. The guitar case banged against her leg as she trudged across the parking lot. Sam seemed happy to be out and trotted alongside her, stopping once or twice to sniff the pavement.

The gas station was tiny and crowded with lots of things you wouldn't need if you broke down in the middle of nowhere, like cotton balls. One older man sat behind the counter. He looked like he had worked there for as long as that sign had been out on the freeway. I grabbed two bottles of water, a couple bags of chips, and three candy bars. "How far am I from a town with a restaurant?" I asked as I went up to pay.

The man scrunched his face up. "About 30 miles," he said. "Dryden. They got a diner and a donut shop, and one motel. Diner's open 24 hours."

I nodded.

"Where you from?" he asked, taking his time giving me change.

"East," I said, drumming my fingers on the counter and squinting though the window to see if I could see Kelly and Sam.

"More east than Ohio, huh?" He chuckled. "What's your name?"

"Tom." I grabbed my change and the food. "Hey thanks," I said, pushing the door open.

Kelly and Sam weren't in sight when I got in the car. "I guess they'll get left here then," I mumbled to myself. Starting the car, I took another look around but there was still no sign of them. Maybe Sam was just taking a long time. I shut the car off and got out, scanning the grass around the gas station. Walking slowly around the car, I pretended to check the air in my tires. I'd hate to get a flat in Ohio. But it wasn't until I was back in the car, ready to start it again, that Kelly came sauntering toward me with Sam bouncing

along beside her. I quickly put the car in drive and pulled forward a little, just to see what she'd do. She just kept walking toward me and climbed in the car when I stopped.

"You're lucky I didn't leave you here," I said. "I would have, if I hadn't had to check my tires." She was silent in the back seat.

"Did Sam go?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I tossed a bottle of water and a candy bar back to her. "Eat up," I said. "It'll be about a half hour."

She held the candy bar up and examined the wrapper before ripping into it. I didn't feel like having a one-sided conversation, so we rode in silence. After about a half-hour, we came to a sign for Dryden. There was no friendly knife and fork sign there, either, but I was trusting the man at the gas station knew what he was talking about. When I got to the end of the exit ramp I stopped and looked both ways down the road. "Right or left?" I asked.

Kelly shrugged. Finally she said, "Left."

"You know, I'm pretty hungry. If you're wrong, I might have to kill you." She didn't smile.

We came to the diner in about ten minutes. The neon letters on the window blinked out "Dyden's Diner" (since the "r" was burnt out). I pulled into the half-full parking lot. Kelly was peering into the windows of the diner, and Sam climbed up on the seat to look out, too.

I had been to a diner like this before, with my niece. We had talked about her trip over coffee and French toast, when my sister and brother-in-law were away on business. We discussed calling and packing and not getting rides with strange men.

Kelly left her stuff in the car. When we got to the restaurant door, though, she put her head down and grabbed her long red hair, pulling it over one shoulder so she could cover it with her jacket. Her eyes moved quickly, scanning faces.

"Looking for people you know?" I asked. "Or who know you?"

"I don't know anyone here," she muttered.

We seated ourselves at a purple and red-checked vinyl booth. The diner rang with friends talking and the door squealing as people came and went and customers calling for Betty, the only waitress in sight. She eventually brought us each a menu, telling us the specials, her name, and much of her life story in one breath, with her slightly southern twang. She was about 40, a little on the heavy side. "I'll be back in a minute to take your order," she said and drifted to a table nearby, touching the man who sat at it on the shoulder while she refilled his coffee mug.

I glanced over at the menu and then up at Kelly. She was sitting back, staring off into space. "You already know what you want?" I asked.

She shook her head. I stared at her and she stared back, finally saying, "The candy bar and chips will last me for awhile."

I nodded. "No money, huh?"

"I have money," she said defiantly, leaning forward. "Maybe I'm just not hungry." Folding her arms across her chest, she stared at me, eyebrows raised.

Betty came back. "What can I get for the dad-daughter duo?" she asked, looking at Kelly, who was silent. "Salad? Soup? A milkshake? Maybe a grilled cheese sandwich? I just love grilled cheese, don't you?"

Kelly and I looked at each other. "I'll take a cheeseburger and fries," I said. "And a beer. Wait. Make that two cheeseburgers with fries," I said. Kelly started to protest. "And bring us both some coffee, too," I added.

Betty looked at Kelly. "You like coffee? So does my daughter. She's sixteen, and I wish she wouldn't drink it yet. I just think—"

"I had a niece who started drinking coffee at fifteen," I interrupted, forcing a laugh and hoping that she wouldn't tell us what she thought.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be right back with your coffee and beer."

"Why did you do that?" Kelly asked, raising her voice. "If I tell you I'm not hungry, I'm not hungry. I didn't want any food!"

I folded my arms across my chest and smiled at how upset she was. "Maybe I'm going to eat them both."

She didn't know what to say to that, just looked away, sharply turning her neck so her hair swung out from her head like a skirt. And she wouldn't speak another word until the food came. Betty set a plate down in front of each of us.

"They're both his," Kelly said rudely.

Betty was unfazed. "Okay," she said, sliding the extra plate over by me. "Now if you want anything else—ketchup, extra pickles, more coffee—you just holler," she said, and I knew she was serious about the hollering part.

Kelly wrapped her hands around the coffee mug in front of her. It was strong coffee, even for me. I gulped it down. Without a word, I slid the extra plate over to her.

She immediately slid it back. "I don't want to owe you anything," she said.

"Well, you already owe me for the ride, the gas, the candy bar, the chips, the water . . . What's a meal?"

She tried to glare at me but couldn't quite pull it off. I slid the plate back. And this time, she kept it. "You let her think you were my father," she said, watching me eat.

I polished off half my burger before leaning back in the booth, wiping my mouth with my napkin and saying, "What? You don't want her to think we're related?" Don't you think that will help our cause?"

"Our cause?"

"Well, don't you think people will think it's a little strange—a man and a teenage girl traveling together who don't really know each other at all?"

"You didn't have to pick me up," she said.

That's what my sister had screamed to me the last time we spoke—"You didn't have to help her."

"No, I didn't," I said to Kelly, even though I knew I did. "I thought I'd be a nice guy for a change." I took another bite. "Oh, and by the way—you let her think I was your father, too."

She sat for another minute and then finally started eating. But she paused in the middle of her chewing and stared at me, finished chewing slowly, swallowed, still looking right at me. "You know," she said. "I'm not running."

"Really. What are you doing, then, if you're not running?"

"I left. Running means you have something to hide. Leaving means—it's just time for you to go.

"So if you're not hiding, you can tell me why you left."

She thought about that for a minute. Finally she said, matter of factly, "They lied. All of them. For three months. It just makes you suspicious of people, you know?"

I did know. "So what'd they lie about?"

She didn't want to say it. "Divorce." She spat the word out onto the table and sat staring at it. Then the whole story came rushing out. The promises for years about staying together, the lies about counseling sessions that were really court sessions, the promises that they would make it work for her because they loved her. She didn't cry, but she did wipe her eyes with her sweater sleeve a couple times, and she was gulping down her coffee like someone was going to take it from her.

"So I left with Sam. I left them a note saying that I was staying the night at a friend's house."

I didn't say anything for a few minutes because I wanted to make sure she was finished. I finally said, "I knew a girl once who ran away—sorry, left—just to see if her parents would notice."

"Did they?"

"After about three days. They were away on business. But she didn't leave a note or anything."

"Was she a friend?"

"Yes. Just a friend." I stood abruptly, scanning the room for Betty. "We should go." She nodded. "I wish I could give you some advice. But I'm not good at advice. Do you want to tell me your real name?" I asked.

"I like Kelly. Maybe I like it better than my real name."

Betty brought the check then. Kelly reached into her pocket and pulled out a few crumpled bills, throwing a five on the table. "Take it," she said, and I did. Then I pulled out my credit card and slapped it down. We waited for Betty.

"So your name is Tom, huh?" she asked as we walked out the door that squealed shut behind us.

"Yeah, you can call me Tom."

She smiled. Sam jumped out of the car when Kelly opened the door, his tail wagging furiously.

"How far do you want a ride?" I asked her.

She tilted her head to the side. Finally she said, "At least to Kansas. Maybe farther."

"Kansas," I said. "Do you know anyone in Kansas?"

"No," she admitted reluctantly.

It was totally dark now, and the road was mostly empty. My car moved across the pavement like an arrow slicing through the air in an open field. Kelly was staring through her window. The silence wasn't uncomfortable, but I broke it anyway.

"We should reach Kansas sometime late tomorrow or early Thursday," I said

She just nodded.

"I can drive through the night tonight," I said. She didn't respond.

"You know, I used to work for the airlines. Sometimes I worked 72 hours without sleep. It ruined me. Now I can't sleep much."

At least she was meeting my eyes in the mirror now.

"Where exactly did you want dropped off in Kansas?" I asked. "Any particular corn field? A specific freeway?"

Instead of answering my question she said, "Why don't you think you're good at giving advice?"

We passed five mile-markers before I answered. "I told someone to leave, and to call me when they reached where they were going."

"That's it?" She thought about that for a minute. "Did they take it?"

"Part of it. Are you too hot? Because I can turn the heat down."

"I'm fine." She leaned her head back against her seat then, and I didn't think it was just because she didn't want to talk. Sam hadn't made a noise for a little while, so I assumed he was stretched out on the floor, maybe asleep.

A few minutes later, after I thought she was asleep, too, she stuck her head up between the driver and passenger seats. "My name's Samantha," she said and then leaned back against her seat, closing her eyes.

It fit her. "Samantha, I promise to get you to Kansas." And, I added to myself, I promise to find you a place to stay and a phone to call someone on and tell them you're okay. She was already running, so I couldn't stop her, but I could do the rest of it right this time.

I think she really did fall asleep then. I wasn't tired. I knew I could make it all night. I had contemplated becoming a truck driver before. I guess it was still an option. I didn't know what I was going to do with her if I did need to stop and sleep for a couple hours. I had a week and a half to get to Arizona. If I was by myself I would get a hotel room, have a few drinks, take my time.

I drove for about six hours, out of Ohio and across the state line into Indiana. I hadn't been to Indiana since I was ten, when my family took a vacation to visit grandparents who were all dead now. My sister and I used to play in their barn for hours, petting the animals and swinging on the rope swing that hung from the loft. I hadn't had a reason to come back since then because they sold the farm and moved to Florida, claiming that they wanted to die where it was warm. But my sister came to Indiana all the time on business. That's where she had been that week. She blamed me, but maybe the whole damn thing wouldn't have happened if she had been home.

I drove past a few signs for state highways. I was going to have to look at a map at some point and curve a little south, to make sure we'd hit Kansas. And my gas gauge was nearing the E again. But in about five minutes I came to an exit that appeared to be a small city.

We were back on the road again soon, with a full tank of gas and a U.S. map, and oldies playing softly. There were no other cars on the road, so I weaved like a river down the highway, sometimes driving down the middle of the lanes and sometimes drifting back and forth between them. I was doing 75 or 80 miles per hour over the middle lines when I went by the cop parked in an "authorized vehicles only" U-turn space. It only took him about 15 seconds to pull me over.

I looked in my mirror and saw the cop walking towards me. Kel—Samantha's eyes were open wide. "Close your eyes and don't talk," I said.

My window squeaked as I rolled it down, and the air smelled like manure and stale smoke from burning leaves. The policeman leaned forward, his hands securely hooked onto my door, and asked, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" He had a huge, booming voice, even though he was a short, skinny man. I noticed that his left eye twitched, too.

"I'm not sure," I replied.

He asked to see my license and registration. "You been doing a little drinking?" he asked while he studied them.

I denied it, but he made me walk the line on the side of the road anyway.

"Do you know what the speed limit is through here?" he asked.

I was pretty sure it was 55. "65?"

"Try 55," he said, eye twitching. "And how fast were you going?"

"65?" I said again, squinting at the speedometer.

"I have you clocked at 82 miles per hour," he said. He walked back to his police car and returned in a minute, ticket in hand. He handed it to me with pleasure. Leaning into the car again, he rested his elbows on the door, looking like he was in no hurry to let us leave. "Where are you folks going?"

What was this? Customs? "Kansas."

"You're headed north of Kansas now," he said.

"I know. I need to look at a map. Maybe you can tell me what highway to take?"

He looked me over. Twitch, twitch. "63. Take 63." Glancing into the back seat, he said, "Who's she?"

"My niece."

"Your niece?"

"Yeah."

"What's her name?"

"Kelly."

"Does she have a last name?"

"Keller." Shoot. Kelly Keller. That sounded stupid. "She's my sister's kid."

Looking me over one more time, his left eye twitching away, he pushed himself away from the car and said, "Remember. 55. The speed limit's 55."

I rolled the window up and slowly pulled back onto the road.

"What were you doing?" Samantha asked.

"Don't sit up," I said sharply.

"You don't think he'll follow us, do you?"

I slowly slid the map back to her. "Here. Don't let him see the map, but look up Indiana and Kansas. I want to know what else we can take besides 63."

"I can't really see back here."

I flipped on the light and glanced in my rearview mirror.

"Is he coming?" she asked. The tone of her voice made Sam lift his head and lick her hand.

"No. Just look at the map." I didn't mean to sound as sharp as I did. We passed the sign for 63 and kept going, with my cruise control set at 54.

"It looks like we could take 29," she said. "It winds around and eventually makes it down to Kansas."

I sighed but said firmly, "Okay then. That's what we'll take." I paused. "Do you really think I'll get you to Kansas?"

She shrugged. "I don't take much stock in promises anymore. I think if it fits your plan you'll drop me off there."

"And what if it doesn't fit my plan?"

She shrugged again. "Maybe you'll kill me." I looked back and tried to hide my smile.

I turned onto Highway 29. "I'll get you to Kansas." I was about to tell her the whole story, to explain why I had to get her to Kansas, when I looked into my rearview mirror and saw flashing lights again. She turned around and looked, too.

"Don't look back!" I yelled. "What are you thinking?"

"Don't yell at me," she shouted back. Sam whined and then started to bark. "What were you doing this time that's making them pull us over?"

The cop was walking toward the car. There was nothing short and skinny about this one. "Do you know why I pulled you over?" he asked in a bored tone of voice.

"I have no idea."

"Can I see your license and registration," he asked as if he didn't care at all whether or not I gave it to him.

"Who's the girl?"

I gave him the same spiel that I gave the last guy.

He stood with his weight on his left foot, one hand resting lightly on the roof of my car. I could hear him drumming his fingers directly above my head. Since he wasn't saying anything, I said, "I know I wasn't speeding."

"Where are you headed?"

"Kansas."

"Taking the scenic route?"

"Yes sir." I sounded like I was talking to my father, and this guy was probably my age.

"Uncle Tom?" Samantha asked from the back seat.

"Yeah, Kel?"

In the same, bored tone of voice that he'd been using, the cop asked, "What's your uncle's last name?" He leaned far into my window to see her.

"Slaker."

I started breathing again. He wouldn't know she said it wrong.

"You folks planning to stop for the night?"

"No. I like to drive at night."

He leaned in the window again.

"Am I in trouble? Because I'm not—"

"Where exactly did you say you were going in Kansas?"

He knew we hadn't said. And I couldn't lie about that, couldn't tell him that we were going to see family friends or Grandpa Jones when I knew damn well that I had no idea where I was going to leave her or even if I could find a safe place to leave her. So I just sat and didn't say anything.

Samantha jumped in. "I always wanted to see Kansas, so Uncle Tom promised he'd take me. He— keeps his promises. That's why we're going to Kansas."

The cop took a loud, deep breath through his nose and looked out over the top of the car. The drumming started again above my head. "Well, that's touching," he said in his monotone voice. "Good for Uncle Tom. But I'm afraid I need to take you both to the station." He said it like he would have told us that the grocery store was out of our favorite kind of ice cream.

"I don't understand," I said, looking back at his lights still flashing behind me, just to make sure that this was actually a real cop talking to me. "What did I—? Can you just—?" Was that how things worked in Indiana? They could just pull you over and take you to the station if you didn't have a good enough reason to be traveling? I slumped down in my seat and buried my face in one hand, just like I had done when my

sister and my brother-in-law and the city police and my sister's priest had questioned me about my niece, because it was easier to mumble and lie with my lips smashed up against my palm that way. Did the police want to question me more? Or maybe they knew something about my niece. But they couldn't know I was her uncle. What else could they be taking us to the station for? I reached over and turned the air conditioner on as high as it would go.

The officer was back in his car. I pulled onto the road slowly with him following, his lights still flashing. Samantha's eyes were as big as bowls in my rearview mirror. "Why are the police taking us to the station, Samantha?" I didn't think it was possible, but her eyes got even bigger. Maybe it was her fault. "Did *you* commit a crime? You *are* running, aren't you? Am I right?" My voice got louder and louder as it competed with the blasting air conditioner. I was pretty sure now that I couldn't ever get her to Kansas, but it didn't matter anyway if she *had* committed a crime and was just using me as a cover-up because I was sappy enough to pick her up on the side of the road because my niece had red hair.

Sam started barking, and Samantha was yelling at me to let her out.

"Yeah, I'll let you out with the cop right behind me," I yelled back. "You set me up, didn't you?" I squeezed the steering wheel so hard I was sure I could break it off if I jerked my hands to the side.

Samantha started screaming that she hated me, that she knew I was lying like the rest of them and that they were going to send her back and that she'd throw up on my back seat if I didn't stop and let her out, and Sam kept barking and jumping around in the back.

"Shut up!" I yelled to both of them, but they drowned me out. The lights were still flashing in my rearview mirror when I looked back.

By the time we got to the police station, the car was quiet. Samantha sat silently, glaring at me in the mirror and wiping her eyes with her sleeve. I didn't even know what town we were in. Before we even got inside the building, I said to the cop, "Why did you bring us in?"

"You don't need to get overexcited about this," he told me. I doubted that he had ever been overexcited about anything. "We just want to ask you some questions."

Samantha and I didn't speak. We followed him into the building, down a hallway, and into a room with a desk and some uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs that he indicated for us to sit in. He went into a different room where we could hear him talking with other people. In a few minutes he reappeared.

"Coffee?" he asked, pointing to the coffeemaker on the desk.

"Yes," we said in unison, looking at the other person out of the corner of our eye.

The cop leaned against the desk facing us. "I'm Officer Hale. This won't take long if you cooperate," he said in his monotone voice. "You're Tom Slaker," he said, pointing to me. I nodded. The coffeemaker made popping noises behind him.

"And you're Kelly Keller?" We were both looking at her, waiting for her reaction. She nodded slowly.

"Do you have any identification on you?" Officer Hale asked.

She shook her head.

"Well, I guess we could fingerprint you."

She didn't say anything.

"I need to question you both separately."

"Why separately?" I asked sharply.

He shrugged. "Procedure. We want you both to feel free to tell the truth."

Samantha and I looked at each other.

Officer Hale pointed at Samantha. "You. Follow me." They entered one of the small rooms nearby and shut the door.

I looked around the room, tapping my foot on the ground and drumming my fingers on the armrest of my chair. Another officer poked his head out of a doorway, looked me over, and shook his head before disappearing.

That head shake, that quick, easy judgment that I had seen so many times before from my sister and her priest and her police officer friend and myself every time I saw my face in the mirror. They asked me

now I could live with myself, but none of them had called since that day to find out. My sister didn't even know I had left New York. What could these police want with me?

And what was Samantha telling them? My foot started tapping even faster. For a minute I even wished Sam was inside. We had left him sitting in my car. I'd still kill him if he peed in it.

Would she tell them I kidnapped her? Would she tell them that I drank a beer at dinner? Then they'd know I lied to the first officer about drinking. Would they believe anything I said then? But she just lied about her name. She told them she was Kelly. So maybe they wouldn't believe her. I tried to think of everything I had said to her. My shirt felt tight. Why did they keep this room so hot?

What was taking so long? We had hardly even been together, really. It had been late afternoon when I picked her up. I shook my head. It was an even shorter amount of time than I had thought. And I had already promised to get her to Kansas, to find her a place to live, to give her a quarter for a pay phone—

The door opened. I stood up, but Officer Hale said, "Not yet." He called another officer and the two of them went back into the room. I sat down. In a few minutes, all three of them came out. "Okay, Tom," Officer Hale said, still sounding bored. "I'm ready for you."

I looked at Samantha as we walked past each other, and she looked me right in the eyes. Officer Hale shut the door.

"You're Tom Slaker?" he asked.

"Yes," I said tersely. "But it's Slaker. Long 'a.'"

He didn't care. "Do you know that your words can be used against you in a court of law?"

I jerked my head back and stared at him, raising my eyebrows. "Yes," I finally said

"So are you Samantha's uncle?"

I shook my head. At the rate we were moving, I wouldn't make it out of Indiana by Thursday, much less to Kansas. Without waiting for him to ask any more questions, I told him the story as briefly as possible: that I saw her on the side of the road in Ohio and picked her up and bought her dinner and found out her parents were getting divorced and promised to get her to Kansas.

"So you didn't know that Samantha was pronounced missing and that there's been a search out for her?"

I sat up straight and stared at him. "Missing?" I asked.

"Yes." Officer Hale pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and held it up for me to see. The picture was unmistakably Samantha. Samantha Byler, the poster said.

I kept looking from her picture to Officer Hale. "But you don't think that I—?"

He shook his head. "Your story pretty much matches hers." Clearing his throat, he said, "Did you know that helping a delinquent run away is a misdemeanor and can mean up to a year in prison?"

I knew. Rubbing my face with my hands, I said, "Am I under arrest?"

He let me cringe for a few minutes. "No," he finally said, "Because you told us the truth now."

I let out a big breath of air. "I promised to get her to Kansas."

"Why?"

I paused. "I guess it just fit in with my plans."

He stood then and motioned me towards the door. We went back into the room where Samantha was waiting, sitting in an uncomfortable chair. Sam was standing beside her, resting his head on her knee. I stayed standing because I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. Officer Hale left the room for a few minutes.

"So your parents reported you missing," I said.

She raised her eyebrows and looked at me, giving a bitter little laugh. "Yeah. I guess they noticed I was gone." She paused. "They're sending me back. One of the officers is driving me to Cleveland, and my parents will meet us at a restaurant there." She shrugged. "The officer talked to them. I wouldn't."

I nodded.

"So where are you going?" Samantha asked.

I squinted at the ceiling. "Arizona," I said "Maybe I'll swing through Kansas."

Sam whined.

"I guess I couldn't keep my promise to you either. I wanted to." She had no idea how badly I wanted to.

Officer Hale came back then. "You're free to leave, Tom," he said.

I looked up in surprise. "I am?"

"Yeah. We'll take her now."

Samantha and I looked at each other. An awkward silence fell. "Well," I finally said. "I guess I'll be going." I patted Sam's purebred head.

"Tom—thanks."

"Maybe—" I paused and then scribbled a number on a piece of paper. "Maybe you could call me next week, just so I know . . ." I could feel my face getting red. "That's the number of a friend in Arizona who I'll be staying with."

She gave me a small smile. "I'll call. I promise."

Maybe she would. Or maybe I would add her to the carload of people who never called, who just wanted to weigh down my back seat for awhile. It was late, but I wasn't tired, so I pulled out onto the empty highway. I would drive all night. I looked into my rearview mirror and saw nothing there and kept driving.